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RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR 1781
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0117
RUEHNJ/AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA 1475
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0460
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0236
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 0183
RUFGCIN/CDR USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NIAMEY 000937

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DEPT FOR AF/W, AND DS/IP/AF; PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/05/2016

TAGS: [KCRM](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [NG](#)

SUBJECT: TWO ITALIAN TOURISTS REPORTEDLY REMAIN IN THE
HANDS OF KIDNAPPERS

REF: NIAMEY 904

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Classified By: BERNADETTE M. ALLEN, AMBASSADOR. REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Italian Embassy Charge d'Affaires Giovanni Davoli (resident in Abidjan) requested a meeting with Ambassador Allen on Thursday, August 31, to discuss developments in refotel case. Two Italian nationals reportedly remain in the custody of the kidnappers, though there is speculation the hostages may have elected to remain with the kidnappers of their own volition. Davoli reported that the Government of Niger (GON) has terminated its discussion with the Government of Italy (GOI) on the matter, thus he planned to return to Abidjan by week's end. RSO and RAO were present in the meeting. End summary.

¶2. (C) On the morning of Thursday, August 31, GOI Charge d'Affaires contacted AmEmbassy Niamey to request a meeting with the Ambassador to discuss the case of the Italian hostages. He was accompanied by another GOI embassy official (also resident in Abidjan) and immediately made it known that the GON had ceased its discussions with the GOI on the hostage situation. According to Davoli, he initially was to accompany a GON negotiating team to secure the release of the Italian nationals. He reportedly has been in regular satellite phone contact with the Italian hostages and the latter reported to him (and in a communique) that they were not being held against their will. They reportedly had chosen not to leave the kidnappers because their location (not disclosed to Davoli) is considered unsafe and they don't feel knowledgeable enough about the area to try to find their way to a safe haven. Davoli reported that he had secured permission to travel with a GON negotiating team, but in the end, the GON informed him that he was no longer welcome in the negotiating party.

¶3. (C) Davoli stated that when the Italian hostages learned he would no longer be arriving with the GON negotiators, the kidnappers decided to move to another location and to cancel any further negotiating with the GON. It is post's understanding that the GOI initially proposed an Italian negotiating team and that the GON (President Tandja himself)

rejected that proposal. Moreover, the kidnappers allegedly had offered to exchange the two Italians hostages for a currently incarcerated, known gun runner who is suspected of affiliation with Force Armees Revolutionnaires du Sahara (FARS). Davoli reported that the GON has cut him out of the case completely, consequently, he saw no purpose in remaining in Niamey and would return to Abidjan at week's end. He planned to hang around Niamey one extra day, in the event the GON had a change of heart. Finally, he indicated that if the GON did not manage the release of the hostages soon, that the GOI would have to take matters into its own hands to gain the release of its citizens. He did acknowledge, however, that the location of the hostages was still a huge question, as authorities don't seem to know whether the kidnappers had slipped into Chad with the hostages or had moved them further north in Agadez in the region of Djado.

¶4. (C) Ambassador asked Davoli whether he had discussed this matter with other foreign Ambassadors resident in Niamey. Davoli responded that he had discussed the matter with the Ambassadors for France and the Acting Charge for Germany.

¶5. (U) On the evening news (Wednesday, August 30) prior to Davoli's visit, the GON spokesperson Ben Omar held a press conference on national television (Tele-Sahel) at which he displayed what were reported to be the fraudulent visas used by the tourists (see reftel) to enter Niger. He emphasized that all the Italians' visas for Niger were fraudulent and that the agent through whom they had arranged their excursion to Niger is a "known criminal", Mr. Claudio, who owns a travel agency based in London known as ARKNO-TOUR with a sub-office in Tripoli. He questioned the Italians' real motive for illegally entering Niger. "Was it to steal Niger's artifacts or other treasures from the region, are they spies, are they in cohorts with the bandits, etc.?"

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¶6. (U) While all has remained quiet over the weekend, this incident appears to be far from over.

MINIMIZED CONSIDERED.
ALLEN